



Food banks face onslaught of need

By Robert Jordan
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OAKLAND — As soon as Miriam Juarez puts down the phone, it rings again. Even when she's on the line, it rings twice more.

Juarez isn't alone. Everyone in the small office at the Alameda County Community Food Bank's warehouse is battling to answer the flood of calls.

Callers are not seeking customer service or technical support. Instead they are inquiring about a more basic need — food.

"Our phones are always ringing," said Juarez, the food bank's help line coordinator. "We keep our volunteers busy."

During July and August, the Alameda County Community Food bank had nearly 6,000 calls — the most since the food bank started the hot line in 1994 — from people seeking help. Calls come in from all over the county, and depending on where callers live, Juarez and her two-person staff refer them to one of 275 agencies the food bank supplies.

With a combined unemployment rate of 11.5 percent in the East Bay and the rest of the country in the worst recession since the 1930s, food banks and pantries throughout the region are awash with requests for assistance. The demand has food bank operators from both Alameda and Contra Costa counties concerned because October through January typically is the season of heaviest demand.

Sally Leonard, a volunteer at Tri-Valley Haven food pantry in Livermore, has noticed the change.

"This past year it has been busy, busy, busy," said the six-year volunteer. "It is always busy at the holiday times, but last year since the holiday it hasn't let down."

Pantry coordinator Clare Gomes said Tri-Valley Haven, which serves Dublin, Livermore, Pleasanton and Sunol, saw 25 to 30 people per day before the recession. Now, that number has grown to nearly 60 people.

They still see their regulars but Gomes is seeing families who can no longer rely on two incomes. Also troubling is the return of people who had been coming in five years earlier.

"People are tense," Gomes said. "You can see it when they walk in the door or waiting in line outside. I won't they are say panicked, but people are stretched. People walk in the door and some have never been here and are embarrassed."

The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano distributed about 11 million pounds of food to 200 agencies from Richmond out to the Delta last year. The Alameda County Community Food Bank gave out 16.4 millions pounds to its agencies from Berkeley down to Fremont and east to Livermore.

The Contra Costa food bank saw a 20 percent to 30 percent increase in people seeking food, said Larry Sly, its executive director. Antioch, hit hard by housing foreclosures, has seen the biggest increase, he said.

For the first time in her 10 years at the Antioch Salvation Army, Capt. Jackie Smith had to put out an alert in February because its pantry was running out of food.

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Smith said the Antioch branch is running 42 percent ahead of the number of families or clients it assists compared with last year, jumping from 120 to more than 200 per month.

"The need is not only extreme, but valid," Smith said. "People always say the homeless people need to get a job. But we are talking about folks that only know how to work and pay bills. People that used to donate to the Salvation Army are now the ones in need."

In Alameda County, people begin lining up at 7 a.m. every Friday for the weekly produce giveaway at Columbian Gardens, an agency the food bank supplies.

On Friday, 210 people waited to receive a box of squash, plums, apples, onions and watermelon. Volunteers began handing out the produce at 9 a. m., and 55 minutes later, the staff had gone through the 7-ton supply.

"There have been a lot more people," said Lisa Lawrence, who started coming to Columbian Gardens in June. "People really need this."

The numbers reflect the need. Before the recession hit, the Alameda County Community Food Bank averaged about 60 calls per day. The calls doubled, including a record 226 on Aug. 26.

In East Oakland, Shiloh Church had the most referrals from the hot line in August, with 584 households. With both emergency referrals and its normal government food giveaway, the church can barely keep up.

This year, the Rev. Robert Allen, vice president of Shiloh Church's board of directors, had to turn away people.

"People need to eat," said Judy Moore, who with her husband, Bill, runs the Shiloh Mercy Food Ministries. "That is why we are trying so hard here."

Despite the rapid increase in demand, the Alameda Community County Food Bank has been able to meet the need with \$500,000 in federal stimulus money, \$500,000 from a revised federal farm bill and a bump in donations.

But the phones keep ringing.

Robert Jordan covers Dublin and Pleasanton, reach him at 925-847-2184.

Calls for help

The Alameda County Community Food Bank had 3,005 calls to its food hot line in August, the most since setting up the line in 1994. Each call represents one household, which averages about five people. Since August 2008, the food bank has logged more than 2,000 calls in every month but December. The hot line had never received more than 1,890 calls in a single month.

The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano does not have a hot line, but its demand has grown 30 percent.

To make a donation or to volunteer, go to the Alameda County Community Food Bank's Web site www.accfb.org . To donate or volunteer at the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, go to www.foodbanksccs.org .

People seeking food assistance can call 800-870-3663.

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